



# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

## THESIS

**PROVIDING COMFORT TO IRAQ'S KURDS: FORMING  
A DE FACTO RELATIONSHIP**

by

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March 2016

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RELATIONSHIP**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis seeks to determine how the United States has become the de facto security guarantor to Iraq's Kurds. The development of a formal relationship between the American government and Iraq's Kurdish population began as a response to a humanitarian crisis after the First Gulf War. The response mission was named Operation Provide Comfort. Though not intended to take sides, Operation Provide Comfort was a direct intervention into a conflict between the Iraqi state and Iraq's Kurds—one that provided political space for the Kurds to pursue autonomy at Baghdad's expense. Operation Provide Comfort was a shift in American policy on Iraq, made more prominent in comparison to American policy only three years earlier that declined to respond to allegations of genocide among these same Kurds by the same Iraqi state.

This thesis recounts a brief history of Iraq's Kurds and of American policy regarding their liberation movement, and applies the framework of three prominent international relations theories—liberal internationalism, constructivism and realism—to analyze Operation Provide Comfort as a U.S. foreign policy decision. This thesis determines that all three frameworks explain aspects of the mission, though the application of each theory exposes Iraq's Kurdish question as an ongoing shortcoming in U.S. foreign policy.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

IR	International Relations
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSD	National Security Directive
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UN	United Nations
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution

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## I. INTRODUCTION

What explains the evolving U.S. security commitment to the Kurds in northern Iraq? This thesis explores this relationship and its history, focusing on the period at the end of the First Gulf War and the execution Operation Provide Comfort during the George H. W. Bush administration. More simply put, this thesis asks: How and why has American policy developed toward Iraq's Kurds? What have been the drivers behind Washington's recent, but profound, interest in Kurdish affairs? Prior to 1991, the U.S. government had very little official interaction with Iraqi Kurds. By the time of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. government had developed robust dealings directly with leadership from Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional government (KRG). As the war progressed, U.S. policy makers openly courted the KRG to become regional partners and help provide stability in Iraqi. Though the KRG is officially considered an entity subject to central Iraqi authority today and therefore not entitled to separate policy action, recent regional security issues have once again highlighted the exceptional place that Iraqi Kurds hold within U.S. policy considerations.<sup>1</sup>

### A. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

United States policy regarding Iraq has been at the center of America's greater Middle East policy for nearly a quarter century, a period that spanned over a decade of low-intensity conflict bracketed by two separate wars. One stated aim of U.S. policy during this period was to avoid the destruction of the Iraqi state into successor entities that would likely be premised on ethnic or sectarian divisions. As the U.S. policy on Iraq shifted from containment to regime change, American leadership remained committed to maintaining the Iraqi state as an intact political entity.<sup>2</sup> U.S. actions, however, amounted

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Atran and Douglas M. Stone, "The Kurds' Heroic Stand Against ISIS," *New York Times*, March 16, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/16/opinion/the-kurds-heroic-stand-against-isis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/16/opinion/the-kurds-heroic-stand-against-isis.html?_r=0); See also Julian Pecquet, "Defense bill recognizes Iraq's Kurdish, Sunni militias as a 'country,'" *Al Monitor*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/04/28/defense-bill-recognizes-iraqs-kurdish-sunni-militias-as-a-country>.

<sup>2</sup> President George H. W. Bush statement during April 22, 1991 press conference, quoted in Lokman I. Meho, *The Kurdish Question in U.S. Foreign Policy: A Documentary Sourcebook*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 559.

to a de facto policy focused on a sub-national partner rather than with the national government, infringing directly on Iraqi national sovereignty. By the time the U.S. prepared for invasion in 2003, U.S. policy actions had transformed America into the guarantor of the de facto autonomy of the KRG.

The divide between stated policy goals and executed policy actions reflects the open-ended struggle between U.S. strategic priorities and a rapidly changing strategic environment. The case of the Iraqi Kurds offers an ongoing opportunity to consider in microcosm how international politics, domestic security concerns, and a shifting understanding of the United States' roles and responsibilities impact the formation and execution of American policy.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

During the period under review, three main schools of international relations (IR) thought were arguably reflected in American policy decisions: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Through the prism of each of these families of theories and their various distillations, scholars attempt to provide an understanding of a state's decision making process in the international system in order to produce a theoretical template for policy makers to exploit at an advantage. Though the divisions between schools of thought are never as concrete in practice as in theory, a brief survey of IR theory provides a framework from which to approach the formation of a state's preferences, goals, and intentions.

Realist thought is premised on the international system being anarchic, with individual states vying for advantage against each other in terms of a balance of power.<sup>3</sup> States are the functional units with the international system with no level of authority above states to which any individual unit could request redress of grievances. This condition results in states having to be self-reliant in terms of security and survival. States jockey for advantage with regard to this power balance, expressed in both potential

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<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979).

(economic/demographic) and tangible (military) terms,<sup>4</sup> and national interests are defined as those things that build or erode state power.<sup>5</sup>

The liberal family of theories' tenets generally advocate for international institutions as the means to achieve order in the international system. State preferences, economic interdependence and political affinity all work to foster or hinder cooperation at the international level.<sup>6</sup> Liberal internationalism, with a pedigree traced back to Wilsonian thought, draws upon liberalism's reliance on international institutions and adds a normative component, seeking to organize power "in ways conducive to the realization of particular liberal principles."<sup>7</sup> Among just a few of these principles liberal internationalists seek to promote are democracy, free markets, universal human rights, cooperative security, and rule of law.<sup>8</sup> The liberal family of theories provides for non-state actors, like international non-governmental organizations, as well as sub-state actors that can affect foreign policy choices based on domestic politics.<sup>9</sup>

Constructivists argue that goals and identities are social constructs and not assumed, as in Realist and liberal thought. Relationships between actors are informed by created identities and norms that define what each actor does and wants to do. Rather than assume that the international system is anarchic by definition, constructivists argue

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wolfarth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security* 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000–2001), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2626705>.

<sup>5</sup> See Hans J. Morgenthau *Politics Among Nations*, 5th ed. (New York: Random House, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> See Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn, 1997), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2703498>; Bruce Russett, Bruce and John Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: Norton Publishers, 2001); and Robert Keohane, and Joseph Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition* (Boston: Little Brown Publishers, 1997).

<sup>7</sup> Ian Clark and Christian Reus-Smit, "Liberal Internationalism, the Practice of Special Responsibilities and Evolving Politics of the Security Council," *International Politics*, 50, No.1 (2013): 40, <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/ip/journal/v50/n1/abs/ip201227a.html>.

<sup>8</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "Liberal Internationalism 3.0: America and the Dilemmas of Liberal World Order," *Perspectives on Politics* 7, No. 1 (March 2009): 71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40407217>.

<sup>9</sup> Remi Maier-Rigaud, "International Organizations as Corporate Actors: Agency and Emergence in Theories of International Relations," *Max Planck Institute*, February 2008: 21–23, [https://www.coll.mpg.de/pdf\\_dat/2008\\_07online.pdf](https://www.coll.mpg.de/pdf_dat/2008_07online.pdf); Stephen M. Walt, "International Relations: One World, Many Theories," *Foreign Policy*, No. 110 (Spring 1998): 34–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1149275>.

that the system is created by complex learning as a result of interactions, and therefore need not be necessarily combative or negative.<sup>10</sup>

Foreign policy analysis, a subset of IR theory, is another means with which to examine formation of foreign policy. Graham Allison, a leading proponent, offers three foreign policy decision making models: the rational actor model, the organizational process model, and the governmental politics model.<sup>11</sup> Students are likely most familiar Model I, the rational actor model, in which those who make decisions and propose policy do so with a defined set of options and goals in mind. Model II analyzes organizational culture to reveal how entrenched group practices and ideologies can affect foreign policy. Model III does a similar analysis on decision makers and stake-holders within the decision-making apparatus of government.

The subject to which these theoretical lenses will be applied is United States policy with regard to the Iraqi Kurds. Prior to the First Gulf War, American interest in the Kurdish people was only as a subset of U.S. policy toward states within the region. The U.S. government was far more interested in the risks that Kurds posed to local and regional stability, or how they might serve U.S. efforts toward non-proliferation of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup> Outside of such concerns, however, the U.S. government chose to treat the Kurds as a domestic issue within their states of residence, not as a separate issue that required its own policy. This convention to maintain foreign policy as a function between states without interference in domestic affairs has practical use in the international arena: it legitimizes the current nation-state system and provides a measure of protection for individual state sovereignty.

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, No. 2 (Spring 1992): 391–94, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706858>.

<sup>11</sup> Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Addison-Wesley Educational, 1999), 5–8.

<sup>12</sup> Although members of Congress issued statements condemning chemical attacks conducted by the Iraqi military during the *Anfal* campaign against Iraq's Kurdish citizens, potential human rights violations were coopted into arguments for economic sanctions as a response to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, rather than as a call to relieve human suffering. See Meho, *Documentary Sourcebook*, 37–62.

When the United States began Operation Provide Comfort to protect the Kurds after the First Gulf War, American policy in Iraq officially became focused at the sub-national level. U.S. commitment to the protection of Iraqi Kurds, in the form of “no-fly zones,” light infantry units and humanitarian aid, shaped the American post-war relationship with Iraq and further drove American policy. It also represented a break from the United Nations (UN) charter regarding UN intervention into a sovereign state’s domestic affairs.<sup>13</sup> Operation Provide Comfort provided the initial justification for an ongoing U.S. military engagement after the war’s end; although it was an intervention initially predicated on averting humanitarian disaster, some of Operation Provide Comfort’s tools were subsequently continued in Operation Northern Watch and employed to enforce UN sanctions against Iraq.<sup>14</sup>

Foreign policy discourse regarding Iraq’s Kurds during the periods under study tended to reflect America’s focus on larger policy goals and only addressed the awareness of who the Kurds were in pursuit of these objectives. In the period prior to the First Gulf War, Iraq’s Kurds were considered in terms of how their actions would affect U.S. regional allies, or as evidence of the threat presented by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>15</sup> During the buildup to the Gulf War, Iraq’s Kurds served as justification for military use of force. After the war, discussions on Kurds in U.S. foreign policy were inextricably tied to the impacts of the U.S.-led coalition’s humanitarian intervention on the international stage and state sovereignty. Even as U.S. regional policy shifted to a post-Cold War strategy of the dual containment of Iraq and Iran during the

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<sup>13</sup> United Nations, *United Nations Charter*, Article 7 para. 2, <http://www.un.org/en charter-united-nations/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> President George H. W. Bush statement during April 22, 1991 press conference, quoted in Meho, *Documentary Sourcebook*, 558–59.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 52–56.

Clinton administration, the Kurds remained central to discourse on international law and humanitarian war.<sup>16</sup>

As the United States became more interested in Hussein's removal, foreign policy discussion on Kurds and their potential roles followed suit. When support for the coalition enforcement of no-fly zones waned, the United States was in need of alternatives.<sup>17</sup> After the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998, Iraqi Kurds, as an opposition group and part of the Iraqi National Congress, were seen as an option to achieve the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.<sup>18</sup> In the buildup to invasion in 2003 and afterward, the burgeoning U.S. relationship with the Kurds offered the means to replace the dictator with a plural democracy.<sup>19</sup> In the aftermath of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq,

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Adelman, "The Ethics of Humanitarian Intervention: The Case of the Kurdish Refugees," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 6, No. 1 (January 1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40435797>; See also Mona Fixdal and Dan Smith, "Humanitarian Intervention and Just War," *Mershon International Studies Review* 42, no. 2 (November 1998), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/254418>; Adam Roberts, "Humanitarian War: Military Intervention and Human Rights," *International Affairs* 69, No. 3 (July 1993), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2622308>; Ronald Offeringer and Ralf Backer, "A Republic of Statelessness: Three Years of Humanitarian Intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan," *Middle East Report* No. 187/188 (March – June 1994), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012594>.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Watkins, "The Unfolding U.S. Policy in the Middle East," *International Affairs* 73, no. 1 (January 1997): 3–4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2623547>.

<sup>18</sup> See Alan Makovsky, "Kurdish Agreement Signals New U.S. Commitment," *The Washington Institute Policy Watch* No. 341 (September 29, 1998), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-agreement-signals-new-u.s.-commitment>; Daniel Byman, et al., "The Rollback Fantasy," *Foreign Affairs* 78, No.1 (Jan–Feb 1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20020237>; Also see Stephen J. Solarz, et al., "How to Overthrow Saddam," a *Foreign Affairs* 78, No.2 (Mar–Apr 1999), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20049265>, for a series of letters to the editors of *Foreign Affairs* magazine in response to Byman, Pollack, and Rose.

<sup>19</sup> See Amin Tarzi, "Contradictions in U.S. Policy on Iraq and Its Consequences," 27–32, <http://www.rubincenter.org/meria/2000/03/tarzi.pdf>; Leslie H. Gelb, "The Three-State Solution," *New York Times*, November 25, 2003, <http://www.cfr.org/world/three-state-solution/p6559>; James Deneslow, "The Kurdish King Makers," *Al Jazeera English*, 01 October 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/09/kurdish-kingmakers-2014930132452403344.html>; Massoud Barzani, "A Kurdish Vision of Iraq," *Washington Post*, October 26, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/25/AR2005102501390.html>.

foreign policy discussions continued to present the Kurds as a potential solution to U.S. regional interests.<sup>20</sup>

### **C. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Operation Provide Comfort represented a seismic transformation in the American-Iraqi Kurd relationship, where in the span of three years, the U.S. administration shifted from ignoring accusations of genocide to conducting direct military intervention to alleviate a humanitarian crisis. What had been a covert, selective relationship before Operation Provide Comfort became an overt partnership, shaped by the inherent promise of U.S. protection of the Iraqi Kurds in the decades after. Realist thinkers argue that the evolution of this relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and the United States reflected the American leadership's calculations regarding the utility of the Kurds in U.S. regional goals. Liberal internationalists argue that the shifting relationship is the result of liberal democratic values gaining prominence in the international system at the end of the Cold War. Constructivists argue that the inconsistent relationship results from the changing definitions and understanding U.S. identity and interests, vis a vis the Iraqi Kurds.

One possibility is that, rather than being exclusively the domain of one particular IR theory, the evolving relationship reflects the premises of several schools of thought, due in large part to the radically changing nature of the international system.

### **D. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This thesis employs qualitative methods to investigate the development of U.S. policy regarding the Iraqi state and its Kurdish citizens. Although IR theory provides several sources for state preference, as well as a number of potential actors regarding the

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<sup>20</sup> See Denise Natali, "Counting on the Kurds: The Peshmerga's Prospects against ISIS," *Foreign Policy*, 22 April 2015. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-04-22/counting-kurds>; Julian Pecquet, "Defense Bill Recognizes Iraq's Kurdish, Sunni Militias as a 'Country,'" 28 April 2015, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/04/28/defense-bill-recognizes-iraqs-kurdish-sunni-militias-as-a-country>; Jeremy Diamond, "Rand Paul: Give the Kurds a Country," <http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/11/politics/rand-paul-kurds-kurdistan-country/>; Andrew Doran, "Recognize Kurdistan and Arm It, against ISIS in Northern Iraq," <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/418934/why-america-needs-kurdistan-andrew-doran>; and Jonathon Foreman, "Building the U.S.-Kurdistan Special Relationship," *Wall Street Journal*, 10 July 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-u-s-should-guarantee-kurdish-independence-1405020652#>, among others.

creation and execution of foreign policy, this thesis focuses on the George H. W. Bush presidential administration as the principle, rational actor for analysis, because it was the Bush administration that chose and implemented Operation Provide Comfort as an American foreign policy action. Administration decisions regarding Operation Provide Comfort will be compared within the liberal internationalist, constructivist, and realist theoretical frameworks to determine which of these best explains the development and execution of the mission.

Primary sources used include testimony and debate records of the U.S. Congress that provide insight into the mindset of key decision makers, in addition to news and scholarly journal articles to determine what, if any, policy debates were occurring within each period. Though using books written about the decision makers and the policy process risks relying on information that is self-serving, this body of work is used principally to determine potential choices and considerations presented to policy makers.

## **E. THESIS OVERVIEW AND CHAPTER OUTLINE**

This thesis argues that the evolving relationship between the United States and the Iraqi Kurds reflects how American leadership understands the nation's interests, as well as its evolving roles and responsibilities in the international system. The remaining chapter layout is as follows:

- II. Brief History of Iraqi Kurds
- III. Review of Iraqi Kurds in U.S. Foreign Policy
- IV. IR Framework Analysis of Operation Provide Comfort
- IV. Policy Implications



## II. BRIEF HISTORY OF IRAQI KURDS

This chapter discusses the development of the Kurdish question in Iraq, from the creation of the Iraqi state until the period just prior to the First Gulf War. Elements within Iraq's Kurdish population have sought an independent state since before the founding of Iraq, a struggle that has intensified and subsided depending on the outside support upon which the Kurds could rely. Iraq became a node of competition during the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, with each of the Great Powers desiring to secure Iraq within its camp of partnered nations. This condition provided motivation for these outside powers to use Kurdish resistance in Iraq to their own ends. By the end of the Iran-Iraq War, however, the Kurdish plight in Iraq did not warrant sufficient attention from a global audience to move outside powers to act against allegations of genocide. Their condition seemed to confirm the adage that "the Kurds have no friends but the mountains."<sup>21</sup>

### A. KURDS OF IRAQ

The Kurds in Iraq are part of a greater Kurdish-speaking population that is spread across the shared borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria as a result of the treaties that formally ended hostilities after World War I. Distinguished from their Turkish and Arabic neighbors by language, and Persian neighbors primarily by religion, Kurds have sought an independent state within an envisioned Kurdistan region since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, but they have been thwarted in that effort by regional and Great Power interests.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the Kurdish people are divided among themselves by geography, ideology, politics, and by the several dialects within the Kurdish language itself.<sup>23</sup> Three main mountain ranges, the Zagros, the Eastern Taurus, and the Inner Taurus, form the geographical backbone of the home of the Kurds, or Kurdistan, from southeast Turkey

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Gunter, "The Kurdish Question in Perspective," *World Affairs* 166, No. 4 (Spring 2004): 197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20672696>.

<sup>22</sup> David McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 8–13.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Gunter, *The A to Z of the Kurds* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003), xxix.

through northern Iraq and western Iran (see Figure 1).<sup>24</sup> Though primarily mountainous, the land also includes lush river basins and fertile, though isolated, plains.<sup>25</sup> The region's physical geography has traditionally supported robust agriculture and livestock breeding, though during the last century, rich oil deposits have also been a driver of economic vitality.<sup>26</sup>

Figure 1. Central Intelligence Agency Map of Kurdish Inhabited Area



Source: "Kurdish Inhabited Area (U)," Library of Congress, last accessed Feb 19, 2014, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g7421e.ct002300/>.

<sup>24</sup> Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 6–7.

Kurds have sought a Kurdish state since at least the end of the Ottoman Empire, though some tribes had considered leaving the Ottoman orbit at an earlier time.<sup>27</sup> After defeat in World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dissected. The Allied victors devised the Treaty of Sevres to partition parts of the Ottoman Empire to various powers and interests, the foremost of which included France and Great Britain. Kurd hopes were buoyed by the text of the treaty, which called for the formation of an autonomous Kurdish area within six months, and provided for the possibility of forming an independent Kurdish state within a year.<sup>28</sup> These hopes were never realized, however, since the treaty was never ratified. The breakout of war for Turkish Independence re-envisioned the borders within the former Ottoman Empire and codified those borders in the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923. Unlike Sevres, Lausanne made no provisions for the Kurds or for the formation of a Kurdish state.<sup>29</sup> Instead, the Treaty of Lausanne divided Kurdish populations across newly-formed state borders, which made Kurds an ethnic minority within Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq, and gave each state incentive for suppressing ideas of Kurdish nationality. Any near-term hopes for Kurdish recognition, independence, or self-determination would have to wait.

## **B. KURDISH NATIONALIST RESISTANCE IN IRAQ**

Kurds in Iraq were an officially recognized group from the inception of the state. Due to the complex political composition of the Iraqi state, with a Shi'a majority and sizable Sunni and Kurdish populations, Iraqi elites devised a system of citizenship defined along civic, rather than ethnic lines, a system that left space for Kurdish identity.<sup>30</sup> The 1922 Anglo-Iraqi Statement and the League of Nations mandate both recognized Iraq's Kurds as having a claim to political status and rights as a group.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement*, 109–10.

<sup>28</sup> Treaty of Sevres, Hellenic Resources Network, last accessed 19 Feb 2014, <http://www.hri.org/docs/sevres/part3.html>. See Articles 62–64.

<sup>29</sup> Treaty of Lausanne, Hellenic Resources Network, last accessed 19 Feb 2014, <http://www.hri.org/docs/lausanne/>.

<sup>30</sup> Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 43–44.

<sup>31</sup> David Romano, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Opportunity, Mobilization and Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 187.

Agreement on what that status entailed had not been reached, however, because Kurdish claims entailed cultural, some political, and—in a later period—economic, autonomy within disputed territory. London, Ankara, and the fledgling government in Baghdad each had incentive to deflect Kurdish nationalist claims for outright independence or greater autonomy. The British were interested maintaining a level of suzerainty over Mandate Iraq, and in controlling the Kurd-majority, oil-rich region of Mosul—a bounty that neighboring Turkey also coveted.<sup>32</sup> Turkey had its own restive Kurdish population, which gave ample reason to oppose any Kurdish independence along its border with Iraq. On its part, the Iraqi government could not afford a sustained challenge to its legitimacy. In each case, Kurdish separatism in northern Iraq was a detriment to each group's interests, and as a result, was actively suppressed.

Kurds in Iraq were in periodic revolt against the government in Iraq for most of seven decades after 1919.<sup>33</sup> At different times, both the British during the Mandate period and the government in Baghdad later made promises to the Iraqi Kurds for greater cultural and political autonomy in an effort to quell or co-opt resistance, only to rescind those promises when the British or central government position vis-à-vis the Kurds was strengthened enough to do so. During one such occasion, after the British had suppressed a second rebellion in northern Iraq by prominent Kurd leader Sheikh Mahmoud Barzinji, the British annulled their earlier promises to pursue a Kurdish government that were made in the Anglo-Iraqi Statement.<sup>34</sup> Kurdish opportunities for independence from Iraq were dwindling.

During the post-World War II period, Kurdish rebels sought to exploit a power vacuum in Iran to establish an independent Kurdish republic. Both Britain and the Soviet Union occupied Iran as part of the war in opposition to Iran's pro-Germany leader, Reza Shah, who later fled.<sup>35</sup> By 1946, the Soviets continued to occupy northern Iran, under

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<sup>32</sup> Peter J. Beck, "'A Tedious and Perilous Controversy': Britain and the Settlement of the Mosul Dispute, 1918–1926," *Middle Eastern Studies* 17, no. 2 (April 1981): 257.

<sup>33</sup> Gunter, "Kurdish Question in Perspective," 201.

<sup>34</sup> Romano, *Mobilization and Identity*, 186.

<sup>35</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 231–32.

British and American protest, and it became clear that the Soviets desired a concession on oil production from Tehran. After gaining no traction toward receiving the sought after concession, the Soviets began to support separatists movements in northern Iran among Azeris and Kurds.<sup>36</sup> Under encouragement by Soviet agents, Kurds in Iran declared the independence of the Republic of Mahabad in Western Iran in January 1946.<sup>37</sup>

Kurds from northern Iraqi territory became an integral part of the Mahabad effort. The emergent leader of Iraqi Kurd resistance efforts, Mullah Mustafa Barzani, became part of the separatist endeavor in Iran in late 1945, when he and one thousand *peshmerga* fighters settled among Iran's Kurds after fleeing a quelled rebellion in Iraq.<sup>38</sup> The Soviets eventually succumbed to diplomatic pressure to leave Iran in December 1946, and with their exit they took what little support that the Kurds in Mahabad had relied upon.<sup>39</sup> After the Iranians successfully subdued separatist elements in Mahabad, Mullah Mustafa Barzani fled to the Soviet Union with five hundred fighters, where he remained for twelve years until the overthrow of Iraq's monarchy.<sup>40</sup> Though the Mahabad Republic was a short-lived expression of Kurdish sovereignty goals, Mullah Mustafa Barzani's involvement with the Soviet-supported project and his extended stay in the Soviet Union would shape American perceptions of Iraq's Kurds during later years.

## **1. The Iraqi-Kurdish War**

Political upheaval in Baghdad gave the Iraqi Kurds new opportunities to pursue their goals. When the Iraqi monarchy was overthrown in 1958, the new administration under President Qasim offered Mullah Mustafa Barzani clemency and invited him to return from the USSR. The Qasim administration oversaw the development of a provisional constitution that appeared to grant Kurds national recognition and ethnic

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<sup>36</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 239.

<sup>37</sup> Archie Roosevelt Jr., "The Kurdish Republic of Mahabad," *Middle East Journal* 1, No. 3 (July 1947): 257, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4321887>.

<sup>38</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 240.

<sup>39</sup> Voller, *Kurdish Liberation Movement*, 46.

<sup>40</sup> Gordon W. Rudd, *Humanitarian Intervention: Assisting the Iraqi Kurds in Operation Provide Comfort, 1991*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Army, 2004), 13.

rights. The president also appointed Barzani as Baghdad's recognized leader of the Kurds. For a period, Qasim and Barzani each seemed content to use the other in achieving their own objectives. Over the next several years, Qasim was able to use Barzani to quell several rebellions in Iraq's north and central regions; in return, Barzani used Qasim to gain arms and to dominate his rivals among other Kurdish tribes that had used Barzani's absence from Iraq to advantage. Supported by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), Barzani consolidated power among Iraq's Kurds and became a greater threat to Qasim's rule; seeing this development, the worried Iraqi President shifted his allegiance away from Barzani and began to arm and equip the Kurdish tribes that Barzani had been fighting. By 1961, events had escalated to a full-scale Kurdish revolt, with the tribes loosely united under Barzani's lead, though neither the Iraqi Kurds nor the government in Baghdad were able to gain a full victory.<sup>41</sup>

Following years of rebellion, Kurdish autonomy seemed within reach. After suffering a number of setbacks, President Qasim was overthrown by a military coup in February 1963, giving the Kurds another opportunity to negotiate for autonomy. Once again, Mullah Mustafa used the disarray in Baghdad to consolidate his position amongst Iraq's Kurdish tribes.<sup>42</sup> For several years, the fighting ebbed and flowed. Government forces, weakened by subsequent coups, were not able to fully conquer Kurdish fighters, nor could the Kurds completely defeat the Iraqi military. In 1966, Iraqi Prime Minister Abd al Rahman Bazzaz offered the Kurds a sweeping plan that would provide autonomy and an end to the struggle; two years later, however, another Ba'athist coup would unravel the potential of Bazzaz's work.<sup>43</sup> In 1970, after the Iraqi army suffered several defeats at the hand of Barzani's Kurdish rebels, Vice President Saddam Hussein negotiated a similar autonomy agreement in peace accord.<sup>44</sup> Initially, both Baghdad and the rebel Kurds seemed to honor the agreement, but a year later, the initiative failed

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<sup>41</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 302–12.

<sup>42</sup> Romano, *Mobilization and Identity*, 192.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

because of disagreements regarding the borders of the Kurdish autonomous area, as well as the status of oil-rich Kirkuk.<sup>45</sup>

Foreign interference both prolonged the Kurdish war and brought an abrupt end to it. In April 1972, Baghdad and Moscow signed the Iraqi-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, which ended tacit support that the USSR had provided to Barzani.<sup>46</sup> Closer ties between Iraq and the Soviet Union stimulated the Nixon administration into agreeing to support the Iraqi Kurds covertly through Iran.<sup>47</sup> Tehran intended to use the Kurds in Iraq as a bargaining chip against Baghdad, a gambit which ultimately paid off. In 1975, the Shah of Iran brokered the Algiers Accord, an agreement between Baghdad and Tehran that recognized Iranian claims regarding the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, in return for Iran discontinuing its support for the Barzani's rebellion.<sup>48</sup> Without support from Iran, Iraq's Kurdish rebels were quickly overwhelmed and defeated, with many fleeing into Iran.<sup>49</sup> In the aftermath of the 1975 defeat, Mullah Mustafa Barzani fled to the United States via Iran and later died in exile. Kurdish groups in Iraq disaggregated and formed new, weaker groups that were unable to credibly challenge Baghdad's rule.<sup>50</sup>

## **2. The Iran–Iraq War and the *Anfal* Campaign**

The eight year war between Iran-Iraq provided a new opportunity for Iraq's Kurds to pursue concessions from Baghdad. Mullah Mustafa's son, Massoud Barzani and the KDP, now based out of Iran, fought alongside Tehran's forces, while Saddam Hussein enlisted Iranian Kurds to rise up against the regime in that country. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), one group that splintered off from the KDP after the elder Barzani's earlier defeat and exile, initially attempted to negotiate with Saddam Hussein for an

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<sup>45</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 327–30.

<sup>46</sup> Mohammed Shareef, *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath* (NY: Routledge, 2014), 138.

<sup>47</sup> Shareef, *Shock, Awe*, 140.

<sup>48</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 338.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 343.

agreement on Kurdish autonomy, but ultimately joined the KDP forces in fighting Baghdad as part of a united Kurdish Front.<sup>51</sup>

In response to Kurdish fighters assisting Iran and to deter further collusion, the Iraqi central government launched a series of punitive offensives into northern Iraq, what would later be known as the *Anfal* campaign. During the course of eight *Anfal* offensives starting in February 1988, many thousands of Kurds were forcibly removed from their homes, some to be executed, others to be relocated; twelve towns and thousands of villages were destroyed.<sup>52</sup> Most of the Kurdish adult and teenage males disappeared after arrest by Iraqi forces. Iraqi forces used chemical weapons to subdue large swaths of the Kurdish countryside to devastating effect. In the town of Halabja alone, five thousand civilians were killed. Kurds fled to Turkey and Iran en masse.<sup>53</sup> Kurds living in villages near Kirkuk were systematically killed in what appeared to be an attempt at full Arabization of the town and surrounding areas through ethnic cleansing.<sup>54</sup> Saddam Hussein's campaign appeared designed to finally answer Iraq's Kurdish question in Baghdad's favor.

### C. CONCLUSION

The Kurdish plight in Iraq had not yet eclipsed the importance of U.S. relations with Baghdad. Despite entreaties made to the international community and evidence trickling out of northern Iraq, Kurdish assertions of genocide brought little action from international actors. As a result of Iraqi chemical weapons attacks against Iran, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 620, which called for an immediate investigation into

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<sup>51</sup> Yaniv Voller, "From Rebellion to De Facto Statehood: International and Transnational Sources of the Transformation of the Kurdish National Liberation Movement in Iraq into the Kurdish Regional Government" (Ph.D. dissertation, London School of Economics, 2012), 130, London School of Economics Theses Online, [http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/474/1/Voller\\_From%20rebellion%20to%20de%20facto%20statehood.pdf](http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/474/1/Voller_From%20rebellion%20to%20de%20facto%20statehood.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 357–64. See also Choman Hardi's "The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds: Chemical Weapons in the Service of Mass Murder," in *Forgotten Genocides*, edited by Rene LeMarchand (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Joost R. Hiltermann, "The 1988 Anfal Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan" in the Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, February 2008, last accessed January 16, 2016, [http://www.massviolence.org/Article?id\\_article=98](http://www.massviolence.org/Article?id_article=98).



reports of member states using “chemical, [biological], or toxic weapons,”<sup>55</sup> but the Security Council did little to pursue reports use of Iraqi chemical weapons against the Iranians or the Kurds.<sup>56</sup> The Reagan and Bush administrations were more inclined to normalize relations with Baghdad, and both successfully opposed the imposition of sanctions against Iraq as proposed by the U.S. Congress.<sup>57</sup> International outcry did not translate into concrete international action.

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<sup>55</sup> U.N. Security Council, Resolution 620, August 26, 1988, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/541/47/IMG/NR054147.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>56</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 362.

<sup>57</sup> Bruce w. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 74.

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### **III. REVIEW OF IRAQI KURDS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

This chapter will discuss the place Iraq's Kurds have held in U.S. foreign policy from the start of the Cold War into the current period. U.S. policy toward the Iraqi government defines, enables, and constrains U.S. decisions regarding Iraq's domestic affairs. With this in mind, any U.S. policy that affects the Kurds in northern Iraq and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is a subset of and a result of U.S. policy in Iraq. How American leadership views the opportunities and risks that Iraq presents to U.S. national goals, as well as how policy in Iraq can affect larger-scale U.S. strategic pursuits, greatly influences the choices that American leadership make with regard to relations with Iraq's national government.

After World War II and until the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, American global foreign policy was shaped to compete with the Soviet Union. U.S. leadership was alarmed at the perceived threat that the Soviets posed, and the resultant choices to address this threat indelibly shaped American foreign policy throughout the world. Due to its location in the midst of the oil-rich Middle East, Iraq became one of the many fronts of the Cold War, with each side vying for regional influence and supremacy. During this period, American interactions with Iraq's Kurds were intended to enable the United States' to influence the region, maintain regional stability, and keep the central Iraqi government out of the Soviet sphere. American leadership's perception of the Iraqi Kurds determined whether Kurds were engaged, opposed, or ignored in the United States' policy toward Iraq.

Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 marked a schism in American foreign policy toward Iraq, from potential cooperation to outright war as the American-led coalition ousted Iraqi forces. After the First Gulf War, Kurds in the north and Shi'a in the south of Iraq began separate uprisings against Baghdad but each was swiftly and brutally suppressed by the Iraqi Republican Guard forces that had escaped the international coalition's grasp during the war. In the north, an estimated 2 million of

Iraq's Kurds fled to neighboring Turkey and Iran to escape Baghdad's forces, creating a potential humanitarian disaster.<sup>58</sup>

Although initially reluctant to get involved, the Bush administration eventually ordered a humanitarian relief mission, Operation Provide Comfort, to protect the Kurds from hostile forces and the natural elements while allowing the Kurds to return home. This action marked the beginning of a direct and overt relationship between the American government and Iraq's Kurds, one that has been leveraged by both groups over the span of two decades in pursuit of each group's objectives. Operation Provide Comfort was the catalyst for and enabler of American policy in Iraq from the Gulf War into the post-Saddam Hussein era.

#### **A. AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND IRAQ'S KURDS BEFORE THE FIRST GULF WAR**

The advent of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States had profound effects on American foreign policy. Despite an Allied victory over Germany and Japan in World War II, ideological and political differences between great powers quickly fractured the triumphant partnership. Perceived Russian support of Communist aggression within Turkey and Greece, coupled with Great Britain's declaration that it would no longer provide aid to either country, prompted President Truman to announce American economic, financial, and political support to free, i.e., democratic, societies against totalitarian elements from within or without.<sup>59</sup> This became known as the Truman Doctrine, and formed the basis of U.S. foreign policy against the enlargement of the Soviet Union and spread of Communist ideology. Three years later, the Truman administration authorized a military buildup as recommended by his advisers in National Security Council report 68 (NSC 68), and adopted a policy of containment to counter

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<sup>58</sup> Michael Gunter, *The Kurds of Iraq* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 85.

<sup>59</sup> Harry S. Truman, speech, joint session of Congress, March 12, 1947, available from the Avalon Project, Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, last accessed January 5, 2016, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/trudoc.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp).

Soviet expansion across the globe.<sup>60</sup> One of the Containment policy's envisioned borders was in the Middle East.

A key facet of Containment policy in the Middle East was the so-called "Northern Tier," consisting of states along the USSR's southern borders that had friendly relations with the West.<sup>61</sup> With access to critical oil reserves and operating bases for strategic bombers against the Soviet Union, the Middle East became one of several regions in which the Americans and Soviets maneuvered for influence.<sup>62</sup> Soviet backing for Kurds in Iran during the Mahabad period supported American suspicions regarding Moscow's intentions. In the months after the July 1958 Iraqi coup that overthrew the monarchy, the convergence of a reported Soviet-Iraqi arms agreement, the return of Mullah Mustafa Barzani from exile in the Soviet Union, and the new Iraqi administration's growing reliance on the Iraqi Communist Party as a power base caused U.S. leadership worry about possible Soviet agitation in Iraq.<sup>63</sup> In assessing the potential of Iraq becoming a Communist state, a CIA report encapsulated U.S. concerns: "Communist control of Iraq would establish the USSR in the heart of the Middle East ... outflanking two U.S. allies, Turkey and Iran."<sup>64</sup> The Northern Tier would be penetrated, influence over strategic oil resources put at risk, and the U.S. policy of Containment would be breached.

For the next decade, American administrations sought engagement with Baghdad to prevent Iraq from falling into the Communist orbit. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations were both concerned that instability in Iraq would lead to an opportunity that the Soviets could exploit and gain advantage. When Iraq's Kurds attempted to gain

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<sup>60</sup> National Security Council, *Report to the National Security Council – NSC 68*, Washington, DC: National Security Council, April 14, 1950. Available from the Truman Library, last accessed 5 January, 2016, [https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study\\_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf](https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf). See in particular pp. 54–58 for the discussion of the containment and build-up policy recommendation.

<sup>61</sup> Ara Sanjian, "The Formulation of the Baghdad Pact," *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, No. 2 (April 1997): 226, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4283868>.

<sup>62</sup> Michael J. Cohen, "From 'Cold' to 'Hot' War: Allied Strategic and Military Interests in the Middle East after the Second World War," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, No. 5 (Sep 2007), 726–28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4284584>.

<sup>63</sup> Bryan R. Gibson, *Sold Out? U.S. Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

<sup>64</sup> Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–60, Vol. XII, Document 161, CIA assessment as quoted by Gibson, *Sold Out*, 14.

U.S. support in their fight against the central government, they were told that the United States considers the Kurdish Question in Iraq as an internal affair, and one in which American would not involve itself.<sup>65</sup> Kurdish nationalism in Iraq might have spillover effects into Kurd populations in critical U.S. allies on the Northern Tier, Turkey and Iran. In addition, U.S. decision makers feared Mullah Mustafa Barzani, and by association, Iraq's Kurds, had sympathies that lay in Moscow.<sup>66</sup> At the time, Cold War considerations took precedent in American policy.

Cold war considerations caused the United States to abandon its non-intervention policy regarding Iraq's Kurds in 1972. Great Britain, whose interests in the region had necessitated London's close involvement in local and regional affairs, had announced that it planned to withdraw from the Middle East at the end of 1971. Soon after the British withdrawal, the Iraqis and the Soviets signed a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that marked closer ties between the two nations, much to the dismay of the United States. In light of this treaty and the British departure, the Nixon administration sought to influence the regional balance of power in Washington's favor by arming the Shah's government in Iran. The Shah had already petitioned U.S. assistance in backing Iraq's Kurds to destabilize Iraq, a request that the administration had previously rebuffed. The Iraqi government's move in June 1972 to nationalize its oil industry, however, provided President Nixon yet another reason to interfere in Baghdad's affairs.<sup>67</sup>

In aiding Iraq's Kurds, the United States was more interested in Cold War politics than in the Kurds' quest for independence. As part of an effort to put pressure on the pro-Soviet Baathist regime and draw it from Soviet orbit, the United States supported the Iraqi Kurds via the Iranian government over several years, but made clear that Washington had no desire for Barzani to declare a separate Kurdish state.<sup>68</sup> The Kurds represented an opportunity to check the expansion of Soviet influence, but support for the nationalist cause was lukewarm. As hostilities reignited between the Kurds and Baghdad

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<sup>65</sup> Gibson, *Sold Out*, 29, 36–40.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 134–37.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 144.

in 1974, the U.S. State Department prepared to increase its level of covert support for the Kurds, but Washington was beginning to receive indications that the Shah was reconsidering his level of dedication to supporting Barzani's efforts.<sup>69</sup> After negotiations with Saddam Hussein in early 1975, the Shah rescinded his support for Iraq's Kurds in exchange for settlement of borders issues around the Shatt-al-Arab waterway in Iran's favor, a decision that also precluded U.S. support for Barzani.<sup>70</sup> The United States' brief and covert engagement with Iraq's Kurds came to an abrupt end.

During the next decade and a half, American interest in Iraq's Kurds was minimal. In the fallout of Barzani's defeat, the breakup of the KDP, the formation of the PUK, and Baghdad's punitive campaigns against the Kurdish population were largely ignored in Washington policy circles. American Middle East policy objectives soon became eclipsed by the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980. Still scarred from the ignominy of the 1979 U.S. Embassy takeover and hostage crisis in Tehran, the Reagan administration began to tilt its foreign policy toward supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>71</sup> American policy makers took notice of the Iraqi Kurds' choice to ally with Iran against Saddam Hussein, a choice which, in light of burgeoning American engagement with Baghdad, would cost the Kurds any potential support from the United States.<sup>72</sup>

For the Reagan administration, regional stability in the Persian Gulf and containing Iran superseded humanitarian concerns with regard to Iraq's Kurds. As reports began to surface regarding Iraq's use of chemical weapons against the Kurds, both houses of the U.S. Congress condemned Iraq's actions and attempted to pass sanctions against Iraq as punishment.<sup>73</sup> The Reagan administration, and later that of George H. W. Bush, fought against any sanctions because they determined that punishing Saddam Hussein

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<sup>69</sup> Gibson, *Sold Out*, 186.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 191–93.

<sup>71</sup> Hal Brands, "Before the Tilt: the Carter Administration Engages Saddam Hussein," *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 26, No. 1 (2015): 103, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2015.999628>.

<sup>72</sup> Marianna Charountaki, *The Kurds and U.S. Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East Since 1945* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 147.

<sup>73</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 363.

would hurt U.S. initiatives in the Gulf region.<sup>74</sup> In 1989, the National Security Council issued National Security Directive 26 (NSD 26) explicitly stating that “normal relations between the United States and Iraq would serve [the United States’] longer-term interests and promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East.”<sup>75</sup> In light of these considerations, the Iraqi Kurdish experience during the *Anfal* campaign, while tragic, did not warrant replacing American interests in the Middle East.

## **B. AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY AND IRAQ’S KURDS AFTER THE FIRST GULF WAR**

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 served as the prelude to what would become a new era of engagement between American leadership and Iraq’s Kurds. After months of attempting to negotiate a return to the status quo prior to the invasion, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 678 in November, authorizing the use of force to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait if those forces did not depart on their own by January 15, 1991.<sup>76</sup> The United States led a coalition of 39 UN member states that began airstrikes against Iraq on January 16.<sup>77</sup> After six weeks of air strikes, coalition forces began a ground campaign that liberated Kuwait in four days and forced the remnants of Iraq’s invasion force to retreat to Basrah.<sup>78</sup> A conditional cease-fire agreement was negotiated at the beginning of March, the terms of which were codified in United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 687 in April.<sup>79</sup> It was a quick victory for the international coalition, but events after the war would keep the United States engaged in Iraq for years longer.

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<sup>74</sup> Zachary Karabell, “Backfire: U.S. Policy toward Iraq 1988 – 2 August 1990,” *Middle East Journal* 49, No. 1 (Winter, 1995): 30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328770>.

<sup>75</sup> U.S. National Security Council, *National Security Directive 26: U.S. Policy toward the Persian Gulf*, 2 October 1989, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsd/>.

<sup>76</sup> U.N. Security Council, Resolution 678, November 29, 1990, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/575/28/IMG/NR057528.pdf?OpenElement>.

<sup>77</sup> Gulf War Fast Facts, Cable News Network, last modified November 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/09/15/world/meast/gulf-war-fast-facts/>.

<sup>78</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, “Terminating Operation Desert Storm,” in a paper submitted for the War Termination Conference, 21 June 2010, p. 275, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, last accessed 19 Feb 2016, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/cgsc/carl/download/csipubs/WarTermination2010.pdf>.

<sup>79</sup> Faleh Abd al-Jabbar, “Why the Uprisings Failed,” *Middle East Report* 176, Iraq in the Aftermath (May-June 1992): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012605>.



Though the coalition goal of ousting Iraqi forces from Kuwait was achieved, Saddam Hussein remained in power in Baghdad, a condition which the Kurds had been concerned about even before fighting began. Before and during the conflict, the KDP and the Kurdish front were unwilling to be seen allying with the West, and condemned the coalition attacks and agreed to stop Kurdish attacks on Iraqi military forces.<sup>80</sup> The Kurds had reason to worry. Their experience during the *Anfal* campaign just three years earlier provided a potent example of the punishment that Saddam Hussein's regime was willing to exact upon perceived traitors. Indeed, the Baathist's ruling Revolutionary Command Council had issued a warning that explicitly stated Baghdad's willingness to repeat Halabja.<sup>81</sup> The Kurds would remain neutral through the brief course of the Gulf War.

Before the ground campaign began, American leadership had tried to take advantage of the Kurds' historical grievance against Baghdad to incite an overthrow of Saddam Hussein's presidency. In a speech given on February 15th, President Bush seemed to appeal to the Kurds and other Iraqi opposition groups to topple the regime in Baghdad: "There's another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator, to step aside."<sup>82</sup> Though President Bush and his National Security Adviser, Brent Scowcroft claim that there was no intention to incite any Iraqi populace other than the military establishment, Kurds in the north and Shi'a in the south began to rebel against a defeated Baghdad as cease-fire negotiations with the U.S. led coalition were in progress.<sup>83</sup>

Battered and weakened after the war, Saddam Hussein's military was still strong enough, however, to repress the two rebellions to the north and south. The cease-fire terms negotiated to end the Gulf War prohibited the Iraqis from using fixed-wing aircraft, but Baghdad's negotiators were able to secure permission for the use of military

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>81</sup> Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 49–50.

<sup>82</sup> Speech given by President George H. W. Bush as quoted by Shareef, in *Shock, Awe*, 147.

<sup>83</sup> George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Random House, 1998), 472.

helicopters for humanitarian reasons.<sup>84</sup> After containing the southern uprising within a matter of weeks, Saddam Hussein sent these helicopters northward to suppress the Kurds, along with fixed-wing aircraft and Republican Guard tanks and artillery that had managed to escape destruction during the war.<sup>85</sup> Pockets of resistance fell quickly to the onslaught of government forces, and fears of *Anfal*-like attacks set hundreds of thousands of Kurds to flight for the borders.

Initially, Baghdad's treatment of the Kurds did not elicit punitive action for apparent cease-fire violations. The Bush administration's preliminary response was to monitor the events but not to get involved in internal Iraqi politics. A week into Desert Storm's air campaign, President Bush had stated that "we don't want to see a destabilized Iraq when all this is over,"<sup>86</sup> but the Kurdish uprising risked just that. U.S. policy, even during the war, was to preserve the territorial integrity and political unity of Iraq.<sup>87</sup> For Mr. Bush at the time, it was not in U.S. national interests to support the Kurds against Saddam Hussein.

### **Operation Provide Comfort**

As the number of Kurds fleeing government forces grew, the plight of the Iraq's Kurds and a growing humanitarian disaster gained increased attention. Nearly a half-million Iraqi Kurds fled to Turkey, with another 1.5 million fleeing to Iran.<sup>88</sup> By early April, the Turkish government had closed its borders to additional refugees and was pressing its European and American allies to create a safe haven for the Kurds on the Iraqi side of the border.<sup>89</sup> On April 5th, the UN Security Council issued Resolution 688,

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<sup>84</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 372.

<sup>85</sup> Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 52.

<sup>86</sup> George Bush, Presidential papers, 25 Jan 1991; <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2652>.

<sup>87</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 488–89.

<sup>88</sup> Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 85

<sup>89</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 375. Since Turkey still housed thirty-thousand Iraqi Kurd refugees from the Anfal campaigns three years prior, the new refugees increased pressure on an already taxed humanitarian effort in that state (See Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 54). In addition, Turkey had concerns about an increased Kurdish population exacerbating problems between the state and Turkey's Kurds.

which condemned Baghdad's "repression of the Iraqi civilian population in many parts of Iraq, including most recently in Kurdish-populated areas," while demanding that Iraq "immediately end this repression" and allow international humanitarian aid organizations access to the region.<sup>90</sup> For the first time in its history, the UN mentioned the Kurds in an international document,<sup>91</sup> a considerable rise in stature for the Kurdish question.

The United States was quick to support UNSCR 688 with action. On 7 April, the first U.S. airdrops of humanitarian supplies began into several large refugee camps in the mountains, an operation later dubbed "Provide Comfort."<sup>92</sup> On the same day that Operation Provide Comfort began, President Bush unilaterally created a no-fly zone above the 36<sup>th</sup> parallel in which any and all Iraqi aircraft were prohibited from operating.<sup>93</sup> Though the creation of the no-fly zone was meant intended as force protection and to keep Iraqi air assets from hindering the aid effort, this no-fly zone would become a permanent feature of American policy toward Iraq for the next twelve years. In addition, President Bush's declaration would later form a de facto boundary that allowed the formation of an autonomous Kurdish region within Iraq's borders.

On the basis of supporting UNSCR 688, Operation Provide Comfort quickly expanded from humanitarian aid into humanitarian intervention.<sup>94</sup> Airdropped food and supplies couldn't resolve the core issues facing the refugees, nor could it alleviate the Turkish government's concerns of such a large contingent within and along its borders. President Bush directed American ground forces to enter northern Iraq to create a safe haven that would allow the Kurds to leave the mountain camps and return to their homes.<sup>95</sup> By the end of April, an area safe from Iraqi military coercion had been secured, and Kurdish refugees began returning.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> U.N. Security Council, Resolution 688, 5 April, 1991, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/688%281991%29](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/688%281991%29).

<sup>91</sup> Shareef, *Shock, Awe*, 149.

<sup>92</sup> Rudd, *Assisting Iraq's Kurds*, 47.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>96</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 375.

Though international military personnel protected the humanitarian mission, Iraq's Kurds and central government forces continued skirmishing and negotiating in the periphery. Given their perceived history of abandonment in the global political arena, and lacking any verbal or formalized commitment from the U.S.-led relief force regarding the longevity of the mission, the Iraqi Kurds tried to use the political space given by Provide Comfort to negotiate a better position vis-à-vis the central government. Consultations between both groups took place several times from April to July 1991, but no formal agreement was reached regarding the Kurdish political position within the state or the long-standing dispute over the status of Kirkuk. Both sides, however, considered the humanitarian mission to be a short-term event, with the Kurds worried about their condition after the coalition left, and the central government anticipating that very development.<sup>97</sup>

The first phase of Provide Comfort was completed on July 24, 1991.<sup>98</sup> The U.S.-led effort succeeded in alleviating the immediate concerns of the humanitarian crisis and drew the Kurds from refuge in the mountains back into northern Iraq. The aid effort was turned over to the UN to manage, while the military footprint in the area was reduced. U.S. leadership was concerned that the Iraqi forces still maintained the capability to move northward against the Kurds again after any planned coalition withdrawal, so the no-fly zone was kept in place and a small security force was left on the Turkish side of the border as a deterrent.<sup>99</sup> This transfer of management to the UN marked start of the second phase of Provide Comfort, a mission that would remain until December 1996.

When talks between Baghdad and Kurdish groups failed to produce an agreement, Saddam Hussein placed the Kurdish region in northern Iraq under siege. In October 1991, as fights between the *peshmerga* and Iraqi military units threatened to collapse into open warfare, central government forces fully withdrew from the north, and government services and salaries for the Kurds were stopped. With all of Iraq under sanctions as a result of the Gulf War, the removal of services effectively put the Kurdish region under

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<sup>97</sup> Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 59–75.

<sup>98</sup> Shareef, *Shock, Awe*, 150.

<sup>99</sup> Rudd, *Assisting Iraq's Kurds*, 205.

double blockade. Saddam Hussein had expected the withdrawal of services through the harsh winter months would cause Kurdish groups to accept his terms, but Kurdish leaders instead took advantage of the political vacuum to create a Kurdish government body for the region.<sup>100</sup>

Just over a year after Operation Provide Comfort began, Iraqi Kurds formed an autonomous regional government. In May 1992, the Kurdish Front, including both the KDP and the PUK, held elections for a governing assembly, and in June formed the KRG.<sup>101</sup> Baghdad condemned the elections as treasonous plotting against Iraq's territorial sovereignty.<sup>102</sup> Neighboring states were uneasy with the emergence of any level of Kurdish autonomy, so the KRG tried to assure the international community, in particular the Turkish government, that the KRG was not seeking to create an independent state, but instead sought a democratic system within Iraq.<sup>103</sup>

American leadership was initially concerned about how the formation of the KRG would impinge on regional stability.<sup>104</sup> The KRG leadership's efforts to reassure Turkey and the United States that the group's objectives would not upturn regional stability were slowly gaining purchase.<sup>105</sup> Soon after the election, the U.S. government did offer muted encouragement when a State Department representative stated that the United States "[welcomed] public and private assurances by the Iraqi Kurdish leadership [that the elections would deal] only with local administrative issues [and did not] represent a move towards separatism."<sup>106</sup> Stated U.S. policy in Iraq had remained unchanged: maintain the political integrity of Iraq and stability within the region, with or without Saddam Hussein.

After the formation of the KRG, the Iraqi Kurds began to be included in U.S. policy considerations in Iraq. The Bush administration had made no secret of wanting

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<sup>100</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 377–79.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>102</sup> Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 93.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Charountaki, *Kurds and U.S. Foreign Policy*, 172.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Shareef, quoting a speech made State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler on 15 May 1992, *Shock and Awe*, 151.

Saddam Hussein out of office, and after making an abortive attempt at an Iraqi military coup soon after the KRG elections, the administration instead decided to fund and covertly support the nascent Iraqi National Congress (INC) in its attempts to oust President Hussein. The INC was made up of a coalition of Iraqi opposition groups, including the KDP, the PUK, and various Shi'ite factions. The group's platform seemed tailored to garner American support: compliance with UN resolutions, maintaining Iraqi territorial integrity, and support for a pluralistic and democratic Iraq. Because the Kurdish fighters and political parties formed the backbone of the group, American support for the INC translated to American support for Iraq's Kurds.<sup>107</sup>

Dual containment of Iraq and Iran became a central feature of American Middle East policy during the Clinton administration.<sup>108</sup> In the portion of that policy directed at Baghdad, the intransigence of the Iraqi government in frustrating UN-directed weapons inspections—in accordance with UNSCR 687 that ended the Gulf War—made the INC connection, and hence the Iraqi Kurds, more valuable to American policy objectives. The utility of U.S. support for the INC was shattered, however, by a feud between the KDP and PUK that brought the Kurdish enclave and its government into civil war.<sup>109</sup>

The KDP-PUK conflict nearly destroyed the KRG experiment and its protected status. The conflict opened in December 1993 with an attack on a KDP base, followed days later by fighting between the PUK and a smaller Kurdish group, the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (IMK).<sup>110</sup> The inability of either side to successfully address the unrest, or come to an agreement on the way forward, exacerbated long-held disagreements between the KDP and PUK. The resultant fighting between the groups left thousands dead and raged on for four years, and aggravated the widespread unemployment, rampant inflation, and soaring food prices already present in KRG

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<sup>107</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq's Opposition Movements*, CRS Report No. 98-179 F, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, June 27, 2000), 2-6.

<sup>108</sup> Harry L. Myers, "The Policy of Dual Containment toward Iran and Iraq in Policy and Practice," Air Force War College Air University (April 1997): 11-13, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/awc/97-139.pdf>.

<sup>109</sup> Michael M. Gunter, "The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 50, No. 2 (Spring 1996): 226, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328927>.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

territory.<sup>111</sup> In August 1996, over two years into the conflict, the KDP invited Saddam Hussein's forces into the Kurdish region to help defeat PUK forces, sending American observers into disarray regarding how the United States' response.<sup>112</sup> In addition to punitive missile strikes against Iraqi positions in the south and expanding a no-fly zone created in the summer of 1992 to protect Shi'a populations from Baghdad's repression, the U.S. State Department began Operation Pacific Haven, a mission to evacuate Kurds that had helped the U.S. effort in Iraqi Kurdistan.<sup>113</sup> A series of three evacuations of over six thousand pro-U.S. Kurds and their families, many of which staffed U.S. funded humanitarian aid organizations, Pacific Haven seemed to signal an end to the Kurds being protected by the international coalition.<sup>114</sup> Operation Provide Comfort ended on December 31, 1996, soon after the third evacuation was completed.

The Kurds of Iraq continued to play a role in American foreign policy regarding Iraq after Provide Comfort ended. Despite the evacuations of Pacific Haven, the United States State Department continued to attempt to broker a peace agreement.<sup>115</sup> In September 1998, peace was attained through the Washington Agreement, sponsored by the U.S. and agreed to by KDP and PUK leadership.<sup>116</sup> One month later, President Clinton signed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 into law, which specifically authorized the president to designate and support Iraqi opposition groups for the "replacement of the Saddam Hussein regime."<sup>117</sup> Saddam Hussein's government continued to be a thorn in the side of the U.S. administration, thwarting UN-directed weapons inspections and U.S. efforts to isolate Iraq. The Iraq Liberation Act was a shift in U.S. policy on Iraq, a shift

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<sup>111</sup> Caryle Murphy, "Economy Tests Kurds Self-Rule," *Washington Post*, 10 May 1994, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/05/10/economy-tests-kurds-self-rule/0d701c66-dbc0-4e92-937b-ccd2090f7827/>.

<sup>112</sup> William J. Clinton speech "Containing Iraqi Aggression: The U.S. Response," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch* 7, No. 36 (September 2, 1996), as cited by Meho in *Documentary Sourcebook*, 524–25.

<sup>113</sup> Shareef, *Shock, Awe*, 153.

<sup>114</sup> Joost R. Hiltermann, "The Demise of Operation Provide Comfort," *Middle East Report*, No. 203 (Spring 1997): 44–45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3012650>.

<sup>115</sup> Shareef, *Shock and Awe*,

<sup>116</sup> Meho, *Documentary Sourcebook*, 525.

<sup>117</sup> *Iraq Liberation Act of 1998*, Pub. L. No. 105–338, 112 STAT. 3178 (1998).

that heavily benefited the Iraqi Kurds. In February 1999, President Clinton formally designated the INC, KDP, and PUK as one of seven Iraqi opposition groups eligible for U.S. support and funding.<sup>118</sup> The Kurds' and the KRG's relationship with Washington, DC, had officially eclipsed U.S.-Baghdad relations, and the Iraqi Kurds were now recognized partners with the U.S. government.

The interest in the Iraqi Kurd plight within American foreign policy has waxed and waned in conjunction with how well that plight aligned with American policy goals. As the American Global War on Terror began shifting focus from Afghanistan to Iraq, the Bush administration included the 1988 attack on the Kurds in Halabja as one of the justifications for the impending war,<sup>119</sup> despite the lack of tangible U.S. response after the chemical attack. During the months just prior to the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, U.S. Special Forces units arrived and began operating from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to support the invasion.<sup>120</sup> As the war started, the Turkish government refused permission for the United States to launch invasion forces from Turkish soil, and as a result, the viability of the Iraqi Kurds as a willing and able partner gained importance.<sup>121</sup>

After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the American authority put in place to temporarily govern Iraq, began to distance itself from full support of Kurdish goals. As the Iraqi Kurds consolidated and formalized the KRG position as an autonomous area in Iraq through the Transitional Authority Law (TAL) in 2004, CPA leadership sought to dismantle the KRG in order "to create an Iraq based on geographical units" rather than along ethnic or sectarian lines, and to strengthen the central government.<sup>122</sup> For the United States, a unified Iraq remained the priority. During the drawdown of American forces in Iraq, the U.S. government remained involved in internal Iraqi politics, but KRG goals did not resonate as loudly with U.S. policy makers.

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<sup>118</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *Iraq: U.S. Regime Change Efforts and Post-Saddam Governance*, CRS Report No. RL31339, (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, Jan 2005), 9.

<sup>119</sup> Romano, *Mobilization and Identity*, 219.

<sup>120</sup> Shareef, *Shock, Awe*, 157–58.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 164–65.



Regional destabilization and the rise of Islamic terrorists brought the Iraqi Kurds to the forefront of American policy once again. In the years after American withdrawal from Iraq, the growth and expansion of the militant group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, also known as ISIS, captivated global audiences and seemingly confounded American policy makers regarding how to respond, if at all. In the midst of ISIS' territorial conquest through much of Eastern Syria and Western Iraq, the Kurds were one of the few groups to successfully blunt the advance.<sup>123</sup> With their success against ISIS, the Iraqi Kurds drew support from the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, as well as from several members of the U.S. Congress who seek to arm the Kurds directly rather than through Baghdad's explicit consent.<sup>124</sup> One U.S. presidential candidate argued that the Kurds should be given a state of their own.<sup>125</sup> The status of the Iraqi Kurds in U.S. policy once again reflected the perceived utility of the Kurds in achieving American goals.

### C. CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Iraqi Kurds and American foreign policy has been shaped largely by U.S. considerations of American goals on the local, regional, and global scales. When the United States was concerned with containment of the Soviet Union, Iraq's Kurds were seen as a hindrance to American policy goals. As conditions changed and American goals shifted, Washington's considerations of the Kurds followed suit. The post-Gulf War period and Operation Provide Comfort mark the start of a partnership between the U.S. government and Iraq's Kurds, one which started informally but which later was codified in U.S. law.

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<sup>123</sup> Carl Vick, "The Kurds are building a country with every victory over ISIS," *Time*, June 23, 2015, <http://time.com/3932515/the-kurds-are-building-a-country-with-every-victory-over-isis/>; See also Dexter Filkins, "The Fight of Their Lives," *The New Yorker*, September 29, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/29/fight-lives>.

<sup>124</sup> Associated Press Report, "US defense chief meets with Kurds in Iraq to build strategy against Isis," *The Guardian*, July 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/ash-carter-isis-defense-kurds-us-military>; Spencer Ackerman, "Republicans propose directly funding Iraqi militias in war against Isis," *The Guardian*, April 27, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/27/republicans-propose-funding-iraqi-militias-in-war-against-isis>.

<sup>125</sup> See Diamond, "Rand Paul: Give the Kurds a country."

While the Kurds in Iraq have been either employed or ignored to achieve American strategic goals, the Kurds have in turn leveraged the American partnership since Operation Provide Comfort to secure their own objectives. Using the political space provided during the humanitarian mission, the Iraqi Kurds formed the KRG and framed themselves as a willing, capable, and reliable ally for American aspirations. After the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, the emergence of ISIS provided the Kurds the opportunity to frame themselves as worthy of direct relations and potentially, of recognition as a *de jure* state. The Kurdish nationalist movement in Iraq has blossomed under American protection, and it seeks continued American support in its quest for statehood.

#### **IV. IR FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS OF OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT**

This chapter applies the realist, liberal internationalist, and constructivist IR frameworks to the United States' implementation of Operation Provide Comfort to determine which of the three most closely explains the George H. W. Bush administration's decision to act. In addition, this chapter argues that American foreign policy decisions regarding the Iraqi Kurds reflected a blending of the three major IR theoretical frameworks, rather than adhering to one framework to the exclusion of the others. A liberal internationalist lens provides a compelling explanation of Bush administration policy, which emphasized the need to support UNSCR 688 and relieve an emergent humanitarian crisis. A constructivist lens argues that during the Gulf War, the United States developed an identity that was overtly hostile to Iraq's central government, embodied by Saddam Hussein; this identity, along with public perception of American culpability regarding the repression of the Kurds after the war, helped inform U.S. policy decisions regarding the crisis. The realist lens contends that it was America's concerns regarding regional stability and regional balance of power considerations that prompted the United States' choice to conduct relief operations.

##### **A. POLITICAL CONTEXT OF OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT**

Before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the Bush administration focused considerable attention on managing affairs in Eastern Europe and in Germany. The Berlin Wall, the icon of Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, had come down less than a year before Iraq's invasion, and the two superpowers were busy trying to reshape relationships over a European theater in tumult. Both powers were concerned over the nature of alliances, in particular where a potentially reunified Germany would be within the balance of power.<sup>126</sup> The specter of political, social, and economic instability in Europe were some of the administration's foremost concerns.

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<sup>126</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 273–74.

In the Middle East, the Bush administration was keenly focused on bringing the Arab-Israeli conflict to a close. Months before the Gulf crisis began, the Israeli Prime Minister had rejected the Bush administration's proposed plan to shape peace talks, continuing the impasse between the parties involved.<sup>127</sup> Prospects for resolution did not seem promising. During the Gulf crisis, the Palestinian Liberation Organization's support for Saddam Hussein during the Gulf War resulted in the group losing political and financial support from key Arab states that had supported the U.S.-led coalition.<sup>128</sup> This change in the strategic environment opened an opportunity to commence peace talks between the Palestinians and the Israelis, which the administration in Washington, DC wanted to exploit. In light of the revived peace process, President Bush was wary of keeping U.S. troops stationed in the Middle East after the war because doing so would likely undermine U.S. credibility in the Arab-Israeli talks.

Operation Provide Comfort was in effect through the remainder of the Bush presidency, during which time Germany unified as one nation, the Soviet Union collapsed into fifteen newly independent states, and the Balkans were awash in conflict as the former Yugoslavia ceased to exist. For the Bush administration, Iraq was but one hot spot among many, and Operation Provide Comfort just one expression of American foreign policy in what would soon become the post-Cold War world.

## **B. OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT WITHIN A LIBERAL INTERNATIONALIST FRAMEWORK**

During the buildup of coalition forces after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, President Bush chose to justify Operation Desert Shield (and later Operation Desert Storm as well) to the American public with the liberal-democratic language of rights.<sup>129</sup> President Bush referred to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait as a rare opportunity to create "a new partnership of nations ... a new world order" based on international cooperation in providing security,

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<sup>127</sup> Steven Hurst, *The Foreign Policy of the Bush Administration: In Search of a New World Order* (Wiltshire, UK: Cromwell Press, 1999): 73.

<sup>128</sup> Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2013): 418–420.

<sup>129</sup> Peter Gowan, "The Gulf War, Iraq and Western Liberalism," *New Left Review*, no. 187 (May-June 1991): 69, <http://newleftreview.org/I/187/peter-gowan-the-gulf-war-iraq-and-western-liberalism>.

freedom, and justice.<sup>130</sup> Throughout American preparations for war, President Bush continued to emphasize the creation of “an international order, a common code and rule of law,” and he deferred American policy regarding the Iraqi invasion to UN authority.<sup>131</sup> While building coalition support, the American leadership’s rhetoric and action both seemed drawn from the liberal Internationalist approach.

Although IR scholars have disagreed on the relative importance of separate facets of the American liberal internationalist framework, there is agreement that the theory’s foundation is drawn from President Woodrow Wilson’s approach to U.S. foreign policy.<sup>132</sup> The fundamental characteristics of Wilson’s approach were the commitment to cooperative action in support of multilateral institutions to produce collective security in the international scene, the development of free markets, as well as the support of self-determination for peoples around the world.<sup>133</sup> After World War II, the liberal international framework evolved into a U.S. commitment to use American power to preserve international stability, but through cooperative mechanisms like the UN and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO.<sup>134</sup> As multilateral cooperation grew, liberal internationalism began to champion individual rights, while accepting greater responsibility for humanitarian protection.<sup>135</sup> Operation Provide Comfort seemed to reflect many of these characteristics.

President Bush celebrated Operation Desert Storm’s swift success in expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait as a harbinger of a new level of international cooperation, and a

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<sup>130</sup> George H. W. Bush, speech made to U.S. Congress, September 11, 1990, <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/speeches/speech-3425>.

<sup>131</sup> Hurst, *Foreign Policy of the Bush Administration*, 95.

<sup>132</sup> G. John Ikenberry et al., *The Crisis of American Foreign Policy: Wilsonianism in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>133</sup> Tony Smith, “Wilsonianism after Iraq: the end of Liberal Internationalism?” in *Crisis of American Foreign Policy*, 56–59. Smith argues that promotion of democracy was a fundamental piece of Wilson’s foreign policy, but Ann-Marie Slaughter argues that Wilson supported national *self-determination* rather than explicit support for a type of government.

<sup>134</sup> Charles A. Kupchan and Peter L. Trubowitz, “Dead Center: the Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States,” *International Security* 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007): 8, [http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/IS3202\\_pp007-044\\_Kupchan\\_Trubowitz.pdf](http://belfercenter.hks.harvard.edu/files/IS3202_pp007-044_Kupchan_Trubowitz.pdf).

<sup>135</sup> Clark and Reus-Smit, “Special Responsibilities and Evolving Politics of the Security Council,” 39–40.

strengthening of the legitimacy of the UN Security Council in dealing with aggression.<sup>136</sup> After the war, Mr. Bush sought to “create shared security arrangements in the region,” while noting that “security does not come from military power alone.”<sup>137</sup> Such was the context for American leadership when, soon after the war was over, the Kurdish refugee crisis emerged.

The case for Operation Provide Comfort reflecting liberal Internationalist theory during the Bush administration is straightforward. As events developed in northern Iraq in March 1991, the Bush administration chose to play no part in the developing civil war, but when conditions worsened for Kurds fleeing the conflict and international consensus on the need to respond grew, President Bush agreed to provide humanitarian aid. U.S. action, however, came only after UNSCR 688, which appealed “to member states and to all humanitarian organizations to contribute to these humanitarian relief efforts,” was approved.<sup>138</sup> Operation Provide Comfort was the continuance of President Bush’s liberal vision of strengthening international institutions and cooperation so that individuals, in this case the Iraqi Kurds, could “live in peace, free from oppression, free to live their lives.”<sup>139</sup>

Operation Provide Comfort was intended to be a limited, emergency response to a humanitarian crisis. According to President Bush, the mission was “an interim measure designed to meet an immediate, penetrating humanitarian need.”<sup>140</sup> The initial operation consisted only of airdrops of supplies, food and medicine. There was no intention to put U.S. ground troops into northern Iraq for an extended period in support of the mission; the American military drawdown from the Middle East was already in progress before the first flights in support of Provide Comfort were conducted on April 7, 1991.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 491.

<sup>137</sup> George H. W. Bush, Speech before Joint Session of U.S. Congress, March 7, 1991, transcript provided by *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/07/us/after-war-president-transcript-president-bush-s-address-end-gulf-war.html>.

<sup>138</sup> United Nations, Security Council Resolution 688.

<sup>139</sup> Rudd, *Assisting Iraq’s Kurds*, 42.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> George H. W. Bush, Speech before Joint Session of U.S. Congress, March 7, 1991.

Military support was critical, however, to distribute aid and to provide access to the Kurds seeking refuge in the mountains.<sup>142</sup> The intent of the military mission was to create conditions in which the UN and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could take over control of the operations.<sup>143</sup>

The coalition military presence was a show of force to facilitate humanitarian aid operations. The creation of the northern no-fly zone, one of the salient characteristics of American protection of the Iraqi Kurds for the following decade, was enacted unilaterally by President Bush in order to protect the humanitarian relief flights from being harassed or harmed in the process of distributing aid.<sup>144</sup> For the first two weeks of aid distribution, the American military footprint on the ground in Iraq was limited to those units necessary to assess the situation and deliver needed supplies; most of the operation consisted of airdrops.<sup>145</sup> As it became clear that efforts to reach the Kurds directly in the mountain camps was not sufficient to alleviate the crisis, U.S. leadership expanded the mission to include the use of ground troops to create a safe zone that encompassed beyond the refugee camps, and extended into the cities and towns that Kurds called home.<sup>146</sup> American military action was predicated on humanitarian concerns. Even U.S. military commanders saw their operational tasks in terms of the liberal international framework, the primary of which was to “stop the dying and suffering in the mountains.”<sup>147</sup>

In line with the liberal internationalist framework, Operation Provide Comfort was an international mission, enabled by U.S. power, addressing humanitarian crisis, and legitimized by the foremost international institution, the UN. The Bush administration emphasized American efforts as part of an international coalition backed by UNSCR. In his announcement of the mission, President Bush argued that it was the UN that would

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<sup>142</sup> Rudd, *Assisting Iraq's Kurds*, 36.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

provide the long-term solution to the crisis.<sup>148</sup> In mid-July 1991, the United States turned over its responsibility as lead entity for Provide Comfort to the UN, and majority of U.S. troops withdrew, leaving a no-fly zone in place, as well as a contingent of soldiers across the border in Turkey, both as a deterrent against Baghdad's forces seeking retribution against the Kurds, and to monitor humanitarian assistance.<sup>149</sup> The U.S. military operation supported the UN mission.

The liberal internationalist framework does not adequately explain key features of the burgeoning relationship between Washington, DC and the soon-to-be-formed KRG. The elections that were held to form the KRG in May 1992 under Provide Comfort's blanket of protection would seem to align neatly with the liberal international approach, but U.S. policy on Iraq exposed the limits of this view. The United States provided no support to facilitate the elections, and even the UN was reluctant to provide any assistance.<sup>150</sup> Although American leadership was supportive of the democratic spirit being exhibited in northern Iraq, the U.S. policy remained clearly opposed to Kurdish independence, or any other condition that would undermine the sovereignty and political integrity of the Iraqi state.<sup>151</sup> State Department officials signaled as much to the KRG, stating that the elected representatives "should deal only with local administrative issues."<sup>152</sup> While warning Saddam Hussein not to attack the Kurdish region, U.S. officials were clear to refer not to Kurds, but to "the people of Iraq," a statement that made a clear political choice: Iraqi Kurds were Iraqi first.<sup>153</sup> Despite liberal ideas regarding the right to self-determination, the United States could not condone outright secession.

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<sup>148</sup> George Bush, "US Humanitarian Assistance to Iraqi Refugees," U.S. Department of State Dispatch 2 (April 8, 1991), as quoted in Meho, *Documentary Sourcebook*, 493.

<sup>149</sup> Kemal Kirisci, "Turkey and the Kurdish Safe-Haven in Northern Iraq," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* XIX, no. 3 (Spring, 1996): 22, <http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com.libproxy.nps.edu/docview/1311904655?accountid=12702>.

<sup>150</sup> Voller, "From Rebellion to de Facto Statehood," 150.

<sup>151</sup> Meho, *Documentary Sourcebook*, 515–516.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Voller, "From Rebellion to De Facto Statehood," 150.



Another facet of Provide Comfort not well explained by the liberal internationalist framework is the United States' failure to protect the Kurdish region from Turkish (and later, also Iranian) military attacks. In response to the KRG elections, the Turkish military shelled the region.<sup>154</sup> On multiple occasions throughout the life of the operation, the Turkish military launched offensives into the Kurdish region in Iraq. Although these Turkish operations in northern Iraq were ostensibly conducted to attack Turkish Kurds associated with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), a separatist group that had been using the Iraqi safe haven as a base of operations, there were accusations that attacks were targeting and killing Iraqi Kurdish civilians,<sup>155</sup> and razing Iraqi Kurdish villages.<sup>156</sup> U.S. leadership did little to oppose these operations and may have understood them to be the price of basing Provide Comfort forces in southern Turkey.

Lastly, the liberal internationalist framework does not explain the difference in aid to the Kurdish refugee camps along the Iranian and Turkish borders. Though there were an estimated three times as many Iraqi Kurds seeking refuge in Iran than in Turkey, the Iranian camps received less than half the international aid provided to the Turkish ones.<sup>157</sup> U.S. funds to aid Iranian camps were one-tenth the level of funds provided to camps in Turkey.<sup>158</sup> Donor governments, the United States included, were directing aid to particular villages and projects instead of across the fleeing Kurdish population as a whole, a practice that seemed more concerned with media visibility than with the welfare of the Kurds.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Voller, "From Rebellion to De Facto Statehood.

<sup>155</sup> Bill Frelick, "The False Promise of Operation Provide Comfort: Protecting Refugees or Protecting State Power?" *Middle East Report*, No. 176 (May-June 1992): 27, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.nps.edu/stable/3012607>.

<sup>156</sup> Adel Safty, "The Rhetoric and Reality of the New World Order," *Peace Research* 25, No.2 (May 1993): 53, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23607271>.

<sup>157</sup> Frelick, "False Promise," 26.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Larry Minear and Thomas G. Weiss, "Groping and Coping in the Gulf Crisis: Discerning the Shape of the New Humanitarian Order," *World Policy Journal* 9, No. 4 (Fall – Winter 1992): 765–66, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.nps.edu/stable/40209280>.

### C. OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT WITHIN A CONSTRUCTIVIST FRAMEWORK

The argument for Provide Comfort as a constructivist case rests in understanding the identities that the Bush administration espoused for the United States vis á vis the world community, the Iraqi Kurds, and Saddam Hussein. The foundational precept of the constructivist argument is that actors (whether individual or collective) act toward one another on the basis of the meaning that each has attached to the other.<sup>160</sup> In other words, states treat friends and enemies differently because enemies pose a threat while friends do not.<sup>161</sup> Through the process of interaction, actors develop identities: socially constructed understandings that assign meaning to the interaction, and shape understanding of one's roles, responsibilities, and interests.<sup>162</sup> An actor's identity comes attached with specific standards of behavior for what is appropriate, or norms.<sup>163</sup> During the buildup for the war and afterward, the Bush administration constructed identities that were each associated with normative expectations with how the United States should act, which then informed how the Bush administration did act.

During the Gulf Crisis, the Bush administration sought to vilify Saddam Hussein to delegitimize the Iraqi leader's actions while justifying the course of action that the United States was pursuing. In the president's announcement of war against Iraq, Saddam Hussein was depicted as a cruel, callous warmonger who "systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation, no threat to his own ... [and] maimed and murdered, innocent children."<sup>164</sup> Mr. Bush continued on claiming that Saddam Hussein met every overture for peaceful resolution of the crisis with contempt, threats, and defiance. In contrast, the United States stood opposed to Mr. Hussein's defiant belligerence, conducting a mission supported by the world community.<sup>165</sup> The contrast between the

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<sup>160</sup> Wendt, "Anarchy is what States Make of It," 397–98.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 398–99.

<sup>163</sup> Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organization* 52, No. 4 (Autumn 1998): 891, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2601361>.

<sup>164</sup> George H. W. Bush, transcript of speech announcing war against Iraq, January 16, 1991, <http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/bush-war.htm>.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

normative roles that the Bush administration was asserting served as a mobilizing ideology for war support, and could not be clearer: Saddam Hussein was “a monstrous criminal, [while the United States was] the embodiment of justice.”<sup>166</sup>

In another normative claim, President Bush framed America’s identity as part of a free and democratic West. In this capacity, the United States was part of the new world order which held the principles of freedom, democracy, and individual rights in high esteem.<sup>167</sup> In contrast, the Iraqi regime was portrayed as having a disregard for human life, and was suspected to have conducted chemical attacks on its own citizens. These stark identities, as drawn upon by the Bush administration to gain public support for the war effort, shaped the discourse on U.S. inaction as Baghdad was suppressing the rebellions to the north and south.

International press coverage of Iraqi forces attacking fleeing Kurds in the north shaped perceptions of the Kurds as victims. Journalists reported the horrors and showed the images of phosphorous bomb attacks, of people being killed indiscriminately, and of the cruelty of the Iraqi army, as well as the intransigence of Turkish border guards to the Kurdish plight.<sup>168</sup> The Bush administration was criticized for not continuing the war effort long enough to destroy the Iraqi army’s ability to mount such attacks; many thought that the United States simply chose not to finish the job.<sup>169</sup> The failure to destroy the Iraqi war machine was compounded by the failure to protect the Kurds from the onslaught, a condition which soiled the United States’ reputation as a Western state espousing liberal principles. Some observers also held the Bush administration responsible for the uprisings themselves, when he implored the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands. Jalal Talabani, leader of the PUK, voiced this sentiment when he publicly appealed to President Bush, saying “You personally called upon the

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<sup>166</sup> Peter Gowan, “The Gulf War, Iraq, and Western Liberalism,” 31.

<sup>167</sup> James Baker, interviewed by PBS Frontline, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/baker/1.html>.

<sup>168</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 373–75.

<sup>169</sup> Eric Rouleau, “America’s Unyielding Policy toward Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, No. 1 (January 1995): 69. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/214226378?accountid=12702>.

Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship."<sup>170</sup> The Kurds were victims, and because the coalition led by the United States was partly to blame, the United States needed to take part to fix the problem. Flooded by media coverage that relayed "images of a human tide, cowering in the mountains, without food, water, shelter or sanitation near the closed Turkish borders," American public opinion shifted from expectations of a post-war draw down to signaling overwhelming support for a sustained military presence in Iraq to help protect the Kurds.<sup>171</sup>

As international and domestic expectations mounted for something to be done to assist the Kurdish refugees, the Bush administration agreed to provide aid. President Bush, when clarifying his reasons for ordering the U.S. military to take part in Provide Comfort, succinctly stated the White House position: "we simply could not allow 500,000 to a million people to die up there in the mountains."<sup>172</sup> This statement reflects a perceived responsibility to act, a perception that constructivists would argue was defined and informed by the relationships between American leadership and the various interested parties. Although delayed, the United States and its allies did protect the Kurds from Baghdad's forces, and a more extensive human tragedy was avoided.

Unlike the liberal internationalist theory, the constructivist framework does explain the difference in aid that the United States provided to the refugee groups. Though the humanitarian aid was ultimately intended to alleviate Kurdish suffering, the aid was also meant to assist recipient governments to do the work. U.S. relations with Iran were more acrimonious than those with NATO ally, Turkey. The constructivist framework would argue that Turkey would, not unexpectedly, find more U.S. assistance in dealing with problems than Iran would.

Like the liberal international one, the constructivist framework's lacks a convincing explanation for other U.S. policy choices associated with Provide Comfort.

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<sup>170</sup> As cited in Meho, *Documentary Sourcebook*, 5, from an International Herald Tribune article, "United States Turns Down Plea to Intervene as Kirkuk falls," March 30, 1991.

<sup>171</sup> James Cockayne and David M. Malone, "Creeping Unilateralism: How Operation Provide Comfort and the No-Fly Zones in 1991 and 1992 Paved the Way for the Iraq Crisis of 2003," *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 1 (March 2006): 125, DOI: 10.1177/0967010606064138.

<sup>172</sup> As cited in Gunter, *Kurds of Iraq*, 57.

The activation of the identities of the Iraqi Kurds as victims and the United States as their protector would not seem to have space for the selective response to Kurdish protection, but Turkish and Iranian attacks within the Kurdish region were tolerated. Likewise, the lack of U.S. support for KRG elections, juxtaposed against a repressive and brutal regime in Baghdad, seems out of step as a nation that identifies and supports liberal Western values and norms.

Although the constructivist framework provides a suitable explanation of where policy preferences regarding Provide Comfort originated, it does not explain any type of precedence between policy options. Constructivists might argue that the American-KRG-Baghdad relationship had a different context than the American-KRG-Turkish or American-KRG-Iranian relationships, contributing to differing responses to similar conditions. While the different relational contexts are indeed apparent, this argument produces questions regarding which relationship is more important than the others in U.S. foreign policy decisions, and in what contexts. The framework leaves those questions unsatisfyingly unanswered.

#### **D. OPERATION PROVIDE COMFORT WITHIN A REALIST FRAMEWORK**

The basis for Operation Provide Comfort as a realist<sup>173</sup> enterprise is that the mission was conducted to preserve a regional balance of power and in pursuit of national interests. Realist theory assumes that the international system is characterized by anarchy, a system that is populated by states as the principal actors, each of which is concerned primarily with survival and security, and unable to rely on other states to achieve either one.<sup>174</sup> Instead, states must rely on helping themselves in achieving and maintaining survival.<sup>175</sup> Within the international system, states form alliances with other states to

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<sup>173</sup> Realist theory includes classical and neo- or structural realist schools. Structural realism can be further categorized into offensive and defensive schools, which differ as much from each other as classical theory does from structural realist thought. There is a common pedigree, however, and enough similarity to generalize the overarching assumptions. This thesis uses realism and structural realism interchangeably.

<sup>174</sup> John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 30–31; See also Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 118.

<sup>175</sup> Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 30–31

establish and maintain a balance of power that is advantageous to the state and allows it the ability to pursue its interests.<sup>176</sup>

For defensive realists, a state's primary national interest is security; how the state pursues that interest varies widely.<sup>177</sup> For offensive realists, the pursuit of security is defined as an impulse to amass power to a level that permits domination of the regional system, and prevents challengers from threatening state security.<sup>178</sup> One expression of a state's power is its ability to project and use military force to ensure its security, making economic strength to produce that military power a vital national interest.<sup>179</sup>

At the end of the Gulf War, realist concerns regarding regional stability and national interests kept the United States from intervening on behalf of the Kurdish and Shi'a uprisings. President Bush wanted to bring U.S. forces home as quickly as possible, but getting involved in internal Iraqi politics would only hinder that goal. The Shi'a and Kurdish uprisings, though a welcome opportunity to have Saddam Hussein removed from power, also risked partitioning Iraq, or possibly inviting the Turkish and Iranian militaries into the fray.<sup>180</sup> Any outbreak of a greater conflict would pose an additional risk to what sitting Secretary of State James Baker called the economic lifeline of the West: access to oil in the Middle East.<sup>181</sup> In addition, the Bush administration hoped to follow the victory in Desert Storm with a rapid withdrawal of forces in an effort to build the growing trust that Arab allies had of the United States. Mr. Bush hoped to leverage that trust to make headway in the Middle East peace process.<sup>182</sup> With the exception of the potential removal of Saddam Hussein, the Bush administration did not have an interest in helping the uprisings succeed.

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<sup>176</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "Alliances in Theory and Practice," in *Alliance Policy in the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1959), 185.

<sup>177</sup> Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 109.

<sup>178</sup> Mearsheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 34–35.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>180</sup> McDowall, *Modern History of the Kurds*, 370.

<sup>181</sup> James Baker, interviewed by PBS Frontline, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/baker/1.html>.

<sup>182</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *World Transformed*, 490.

The lack of initial U.S. response to the plight of the fleeing Kurdish refugees was a continuation of this realist approach to post-war Iraq. Before the war, NSD 26 had already laid out the Bush administration's policy choice of seeking normalized and economically beneficial relations with the government in Baghdad, despite the awareness of Saddam Hussein's *Anfal* campaign against the Kurds. After the war, despite ceasefire agreements to the contrary, a senior Pentagon official indicated a willingness to allow Saddam Hussein to use Iraqi planes to put down the rebellions "as long as [Iraqi aircraft] did not threaten allied forces."<sup>183</sup> American leaders were willing to overlook an emerging human crisis in order to "leave Baghdad enough power to survive as a threat to ... Iran,"<sup>184</sup> while also avoiding a greater conflagration from the breakup of Iraq.

The case for Provide Comfort as a realist policy prescription lies in the wording of UNSCR 688. Although the Security Council passed UNSCR 688 in response to a humanitarian crisis, it cited the flow of Kurdish refugees as a threat to "international peace and security in the region" as the issue to be addressed.<sup>185</sup> The massive influx of Kurds fleeing the Iraqi military threatened to destabilize NATO ally, Turkey, and undermine Turkish efforts against the PKK.<sup>186</sup> In addition, the Bush administration was concerned with a possible large Turkish military response that might further destabilize the region.<sup>187</sup> It was this threat to regional stability that finally helped French and Turkish representatives to convince the Bush administration to get involved at the UN level. Once undertaken, Operation Provide Comfort seems to address U.S. and Turkish stability concerns.

The realist framework does account for the disparity in aid provided to refugee populations along the Iranian and Turkish borders. Provide Comfort was meant to

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<sup>183</sup> R. W. Apple, "After the War: Politics, Another Gulf War?" *New York Times*, March 10, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/10/world/after-the-war-politics-another-gulf-war.html>.

<sup>184</sup> Colin Powell, as quoted by Hurst, *Foreign Policy of the Bush Administration*, 122.

<sup>185</sup> UNSCR 688.

<sup>186</sup> Evelyn Farkas, *Fractured States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Iraq, Ethiopia, and Bosnia in the 1990s* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 22.

<sup>187</sup> Lewis D. Solomon, *Paul D. Wolfowitz: Visionary Intellectual, Policymaker, and Strategist* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007): 68.

address stability concerns in Turkey, not Iran, so the bulk of U.S. aid was provided in Ankara's direction. From the Bush administration's perspective, instability in Iran may have brought about a welcome change within a regime hostile to the United States.

The realist framework addresses the other weaknesses in the liberal internationalist and constructivist explanations of Provide Comfort. The United States tolerated Turkish attacks into northern Iraq because, in realist terms, Provide Comfort was intended to preserve the regional balance of power and stability. If that goal required the Turkish military to conduct limited operations against alleged terrorist camps to maintain Turkish domestic stability, so be it. Likewise, the Bush administration's distancing itself from the KRG elections can be explained in realist terms. The election threatened to undermine the Iraqi state and destabilize the regional balance of power, a condition counter to what the Bush administration hoped to preserve.

Provide Comfort as a realist policy action is incomplete. Rather than addressing the normative aspects of Provide Comfort, the realist framework dismisses them in favor of balance of power considerations. It is difficult to ignore, however, that the Bush administration sought to legitimize the operation at the UN Security Council, and that the bulk of the mission was later turned over to the UN, a non-state actor. The realist framework is also silent regarding the development of a *de facto* partnership between the American government and the Iraqi Kurds, a sub-state actor, a condition more directly addressed in the other two theoretical frameworks.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

Characterizing Operation Provide Comfort as a policy decision solely within one theoretical framework would be incomplete: the normative, humanitarian concerns of the mission cannot be ignored, nor can the concerns regarding the system-level effects of the refugee crisis on the geopolitical environment. Having asserted the United States' identity during the Gulf Crisis as the protector of the weak and helpless (i.e., the Kuwaitis), the Bush administration clearly felt some domestic and international pressure to protect another weak group, the Kurds, against the same villain that the United States had just defeated. The administration was also forced to respond to criticism for not finishing the



Gulf War, and for allowing the Iraqi army to brutalize the Kurds. President Bush did seek legitimacy for the mission at the UN Security Council, and did turn the mission over to the UN once security conditions on the ground permitted. And, even prior to the Gulf War, the White House was clearly concerned about regional stability, as well as with keeping Iran from capitalizing on the post-war developments. The manner in which the Bush administration executed Operation Provide Comfort displays the confluence of liberal internationalist, constructivist, and realist frameworks in the policy decision, rather than one framework to the exclusion of the others.

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## **V. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

The American decision to protect the Iraqi Kurds in April 1991 exposes the risks of seeking immediate answers to pressing, current issues at the expense of longer-term strategic goals. Whether the Bush administration conducted Operation Provide Comfort to come to the defense of human rights and reduce human suffering, protect a minority group against brutal persecution, or maintain regional stability, the White House sought a solution to the problem on a tactical level that ran in direct opposition to policy goals on the strategic level. Despite not wanting to become embroiled in the political dispute between the Iraqi Kurds and the central government, the White House did exactly that, and did so in a manner that made sense when addressing the refugee crisis. Operation Provide Comfort was the first expression of an overt, de facto partnership between U.S. government and the KRG, a relationship that has served to undermine the U.S. commitment to Iraqi territorial integrity, sovereignty, and authority.

Operation Provide Comfort indelibly shaped U.S. actions in Iraq after the Gulf War. The U.S. military post-war draw down was disrupted in order to distribute aid and protect the civilian Kurdish population, and U.S. forces remained directly engaged in the region in a way that the Bush administration had hoped to avoid. The policy of protecting the Kurds evolved into a relationship in which American leadership saw the Kurds as reliable partners in achieving U.S. policy goals in Iraq. Although the Clinton administration formally ended the humanitarian facet of Operation Provide Comfort in December 1996, it maintained the no-fly zone mechanism under the name Operation Northern Watch. U.S. patrols of the no-fly zones continued to serve as an enforcement tool until the American invasion in 2003.

The Bush administration expected Operation Provide Comfort to be a mission of limited duration, conducted to address a limited condition, and executed with limited strategic effects, but the White House never defined a limit for the enterprise. Without distinct mission completion criteria and an exit strategy for the military, U.S. motivations to remain involved in northern Iraq were perpetual in all three IR theoretical frameworks, until either Saddam Hussein was removed from power, or the relationship between

Baghdad and the Kurds was redefined. Both of these events occurred after the 2003 invasion.

Operation Provide Comfort hindered domestic diplomacy between the KRG and Baghdad, which prolonged the need for U.S. forces in the area. Despite not wanting to become involved in domestic Iraqi politics, the Bush administration did just that by declaring an arbitrary border north of the 36th parallel, a border defended by American military power. Any agreements Baghdad made with the KRG would have been under threat of foreign military intervention, requiring continual enforcement by outside powers. A political solution for the Kurdish question in Iraq was no more likely during Provide Comfort than before it.

Within the liberal internationalist framework, the primary motivation for U.S. involvement was to provide humanitarian aid and prevent human rights violations. In the absence of coalition intervention, the threat of Iraqi forces exacting punishment upon the Kurds was evident, particularly in light of the *Anfal* campaign three years earlier. A military deterrent was necessary to address the threat, unless the Iraqi Kurds could reach an amicable political settlement of their ongoing dispute with Baghdad. Saddam Hussein had little incentive to offer concessions to the Kurds, particularly in light of the Bush administration's unwillingness to remove him from power militarily.

Likewise, the constructivist motivations for assisting Iraqi Kurds were not addressed by the mission. The threat of the brutal dictator victimizing the Kurds continued, requiring the United States forces to remain in the area to protect them. International sanctions and Saddam Hussein's seeming defiance of UN weapons inspections further complicated the relationships between Washington, Erbil, and Baghdad. The White House refused to negotiate with Saddam Hussein's government on any subject while Washington considered Baghdad in violation of cease fire requirements, which meant no opportunity to broker a political solution to the Kurdish plight. Operation Provide Comfort did nothing to resolve the conflict inherent in the identities and relationships between Washington, Baghdad, and Erbil, and in turn that conflict of identities continued to simmer throughout the period that the mission was in force.

The regional stability and balance of power concerns that Operation Provide Comfort addressed within the realist framework did not vanish as a result of the mission. For the reasons already discussed, the possibility of a similar refugee condition occurring again after a U.S. departure was high. Since the Bush administration avoided seeking remedies to the underlying political issues and remained unwilling to accept the consequences of departure, the mission continued.

The duration of Operation Provide Comfort and the nature of enforcement undermined coalition support for the mission. Though initially the no-fly zones were patrolled by French, British, and American aircraft, by late 1996 the French government decided to rescind its support for the military mission. International criticism mounted regarding questions on legality of the no-fly zones and the imposition on the sovereignty of a UN member state. What legitimacy the mission held was put into question when the KDP invited Iraqi forces into the Kurdish region to defeat the PUK. When the Clinton administration ordered punitive strikes and expanded the southern no-fly zone in response to the Iraqi military presence in the north, U.S. protection of the Kurds was reduced to caricature.

In the absence of a defined exit plan, the duration of Operation Provide Comfort caused the mission to evolve beyond the scope of humanitarian assistance. Due to the time-sensitive nature of the refugee crisis, U.S. policy surrounding Operation Provide Comfort was formulated in an ad hoc manner that helped justify an incremental expansion of the mission. The inhospitable terrain where the refugee camps were located necessitated the air drop of relief supplies, which in turn justified (in the Bush administration view) the creation of a no-fly zone to protect the aircraft. That protection was later transferred to ground troops in the affected region who were later distributing aid. Alleviating the humanitarian crisis on the ground required protecting the Kurds and enticing them to return to their homes, a protection that developed into a full partnership and provided the political space to allow Iraqi Kurdish nationalism to achieve its signal expression in the formation of the KRG. As Operation Provide Comfort continued, the aid that flowed to the Iraqi Kurds strengthened the KRG's power vis á vis Baghdad and increased the pressure that the Kurds could exert on the state in their quest for autonomy.

The duration of Operation Provide Comfort reinforced the relationships formed between the White House and the KRG. Though it was no secret that President Bush desired an overthrow of Saddam Hussein, his administration never overtly moved to achieve that end. Nonetheless, the antagonism between governments gave the White House an affinity for the Kurds that was not there during the period of the *Anfal* campaign. The Clinton administration's policy of dual containment built on this hostility toward Baghdad and openly sought to use the Kurds as agents of regime change. Thus a relationship that began with the United States as protector of the Kurdish victims became a covert, but full-fledged, partnership that remained in a de facto status until the Iraq Liberation Act. As a result of this growing relationship, the United States has shown itself willing to expend blood, treasure, and political capital to avoid the appearance of failing the mission to protect the Kurds from Saddam Hussein.

U.S. support for the Kurds continues to complicate the internal political dispute in Iraq. At the present time, as it was during the period that began Operation Provide Comfort, the desire to see tactical and operational level results is eclipsing strategic level criticism for the current course of action. ISIS has emerged as the new villain to replace Saddam Hussein as the Kurds' tormentor, a villain that the United States has declared an interest in thwarting. The peshmerga's success in staving off a rout of KRG-held areas has once again brought the American-Iraqi Kurd relationship to the forefront of U.S. policy discussion. Decision makers in Washington want to empower and arm the Kurds in Iraq, as well as those in Syria, in the fight against ISIS, against the expressed desires of the respective central governments. Doing so, however, would also serve to strengthen the separatist ambitions within the Kurdish groups. The underlying political objectives of the Iraqi Kurds have not changed, nor has the Iraqi, Turkish, Iranian, and Syrian opposition to an independent Kurdish polity in the region. American involvement has implications in not only the fighting in Iraq, but also the Syrian civil war.

The U.S.-Iraqi Kurd relationship threatens to reduce U.S. regional influence. Despite central government opposition, American leadership has continued to partner with sub-state entities in the struggle against ISIS, with seeming little regard to the incremental political claims that are being undertaken at the expense of other U.S. policy

aims. U.S. forces have entered into agreements with Syrian Kurds for the use of airfields in territory under their control to facilitate the U.S. air campaign against ISIS.<sup>188</sup> Likewise, following victories of ISIS forces, KRG militias have seized control of territory whose status had long been disputed with Baghdad.<sup>189</sup> Though the U.S. government has repeatedly expressed a desire to avoid becoming entangled in answering the Kurdish question in Iraq, it is apparent that U.S. action has made the United States a participant in the argument. In response, the Iraqi and Syrian governments may seek closer ties to other powers, including Iran and Russia, to offset U.S. support for their rivals. American support for Kurdish groups would likely put further strain on the relationship with the Turkish government as well.

As in the post-Gulf War period, U.S. leadership is once again presented with the question of what to do about U.S. involvement with the Iraqi (and Syrian) Kurds. Present American policy threatens to maintain the U.S. government as an unwitting and unwilling actor in the ongoing dispute regarding the status of the Kurds. With U.S. assistance, Kurdish groups have the potential emerge from the conflict with ISIS and the Syrian civil war stronger than when they entered, with the fundamental political quarrel with their respective states still intact, and allegiance to the central government at its nadir. American foreign policy must seek to diplomatically engage, rather than ignore by the exercise of force, the underlying issues that threaten to embroil the region in widespread conflict once again.

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<sup>188</sup> Diana Al Rifai, "U.S. 'Takes Control' of Rmeilan Airfield in Syria," Al Jazeera, January 20, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/01/takes-control-rmeilan-airfield-syria-160119141331681.html>.

<sup>189</sup> Denise Natali, "Iraqi Kurdish land grabs anger Sunni Arabs," Al Monitor, January 29, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/01/iraq-kurdistan-land-grab-resentment-sunni.html>.

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